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ABSTRACT

The booklet addresses problems facing handicapped children beginning public school. Transition services to ease the adjustment from a special preschool to the public schools and increase the likelihood of academic and social progress are said to include active preparation of the child by teaching school skills he or she has not yet mastered. Followup services in the form of training or consultation to the public school teachers is also described. The public school's role is seen to include structuring the child's situation for success. Services of the Early Childhood Transition Program at the University of Kansas include a special preschool class for children with learning or behavioral problems. (CL)

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Helping Young Handicapped Children Succeed When They Begin Public School

by Stan C. Paine and Susan A. Fowler

When a child begins public school as a kindergartener or first grader, it can be a time of much uncertainty and apprehension--especially for a handicapped child. Even the child who has had a day-care or preschool experience faces a big adjustment. What are some of the problems that can arise when the handicapped child begins public school? And what can special preschool programs and public schools do to ease these problems and to help the child experience success in this new school experience?

BEGINNING PUBLIC SCHOOL: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Starting school is a big turning point in the lives of most young children. For many, it is the experience that their parents and older siblings have been talking to them about for as long as they can remember. For some, it is the first time that they have been in a structured program with other children. For a few, it might be the first formal separation they have had from their parents. In short, starting school can be confusing--or even frightening--even for children who will adjust quickly and have highly successful school experiences. For children who will have problems in school--those with learning or behavior problems or those with physical or sensory (visual or hearing) handicaps--the confusion and fear coming from starting school might be even more intense.

Beginning school is an emotional time for

children. Most children will adjust quickly to the new faces, places, and routines when they start school. But children who know that they are different from the other children--or who sense it quickly--could have much more difficulty adjusting. A child might have many questions--not just about school itself, but about how the child fits in with the rest of the class. The child might ask, "Why am I different from the other kids?", "Will I have any friends?", "Will I be able to do the work?"

Concerned adults (teachers, aides, parent volunteers, etc.) want to help the handicapped child adjust to school. But often they are not sure what will help. This paper will look at how success is defined for public school children and what can be done to help handicapped children meet the criteria for success. But first, let's look more closely at who the handicapped children are who will require these services.

WHO IS THE YOUNG HANDICAPPED CHILD?

In general, young handicapped children are considered to be children in preschool or in the primary grades (K, 1, 2, & 3) who have one or more of the following problems: learning problems (not learning what the other children learn in the same amount of time), behavior problems, (being disruptive, not participating, not following directions, etc.), physical handicaps, visual handicaps, or speech/hearing handicaps.

The problems listed here appear in many degrees or levels of seriousness. Most children have difficulty with some skill at some time. But children who have trouble with one skill all of the time or with most of the skills most of the time are considered handicapped. Of concern are problems which are likely to prevent the child from keeping up with the rest of the class and from having a successful school experience. If the child has too many problems--or if there

is only one main problem but it occurs too often--the child is likely to be judged handicapped. These are the children who can benefit from the kind of program described in this paper.

SPECIAL PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES FOR HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

Most handicaps young children have are not identified until the child enrolls in school. At this time, most schools conduct a screening (a series of simple tests) to identify children who have physical or sensory problems which will interfere with future school work. Learning and behavior problems usually do not appear until the child has been in school for a short while. Within a few weeks the teacher can usually identify children who are having conduct problems and who are having trouble keeping up with the rest of the children.

Some problems young children have are serious enough or obvious enough that they are noticed long before the child starts school. Some problems can even

be seen at the time of birth. When parents, medical staff, or others see a problem in a child which might eventually interfere with the child's school experience, they often refer the child to a special preschool program if one is available in the community.

Special preschool programs are designed to stimulate the development of young handicapped children before they start school. These programs usually work on several different skill areas such as motor skills, language skills, social skills, and cognitive (preacademic and academic) skills. Sometimes special preschools focus on one skill area, such as language, but provide stimulation in other areas as well. Most preschools are able to tailor a program to fit a child's special needs yet still provide a thorough program.

Many special preschool programs operate like schools; the children come to the program for services. Other programs provide services to the child in the home. In these programs, a trained consultant goes into the home on a regular schedule to help the parents work with their handicapped child. Usually, the consultant then leaves instructions for a series of activities which the parents are asked to do with the child every day until the consultant's next visit. The programs which provide services to the child in the home usually are able to provide stimulating activities in any of the developmental areas.

THE TRANSITION FROM A SPECIAL PRESCHOOL TO THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

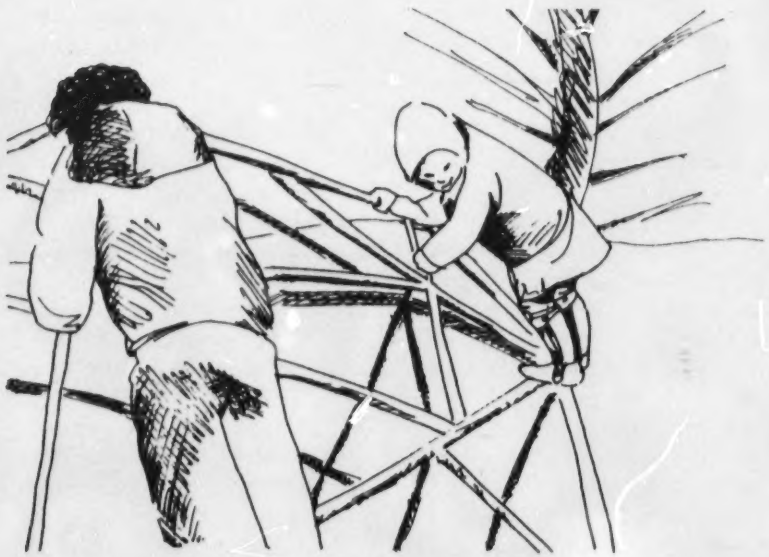
It is easy to assume that handicapped children who have participated in a special preschool program will have an advantage over nonhandicapped children when starting public school because of their preschool experience. It is often thought, at the very least, that the two groups of children will be on even footing, since the preschool experience should take care

of any problems the handicapped children have had in the past. But this is rarely the case.

Often, if a handicapped child has had problems of language, cognitive, social, or motor behavior before starting school, the child will have similar problems after starting school--even with prior preschool experience. There are at least two reasons for this.

First, problems do not go away just because the child has been in preschool. They are harder to solve than that.

Second, even if the child's problems did improve in preschool, they are quite likely to reappear in school unless they are worked on directly in school, too. These problems suggest that even if a handicapped child has had a preschool experience, the transition into public school might still be very difficult. The child might still have the same problems in school as the child had in preschool. In any case, the child who has needed special services in the early childhood years very likely will need some form of special services in order to be successful in the public schools.



WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA FOR SUCCESS?

In order for handicapped children to be considered successful in the public schools, they must meet two criteria--they must be in the "lease restrictive" setting possible, given their ability, and they must be "doing well."

For most handicapped children, the "least restrictive" educational setting is the regular classroom. Placing a handicapped child in a regular classroom setting is called "mainstreaming" because the child is placed in the "mainstream of education" in that school instead of in the "sidestream" of a separate special education classroom.

However, if the handicapped child cannot function in the regular classroom without being disruptive or requiring constant attention, the regular classroom would not be the least restrictive alternative. This is because neither the handicapped child nor the other children would be learning as much as possible, and anything which keeps students from learning as much as they are capable of makes the situation more restrictive. The eventual placement goal for all children is the regular classroom. But in considering what is the least restrictive for any given child, two things must be considered: how closely the child's program comes to a regular classroom program, and the extent to which the child is able to work up to his or her potential in that setting.

"Doing well" simply means that the child is making good progress in all areas of the curriculum and that the child is not doing anything which would cause the school professionals to return him or her to a more restrictive setting. The child might still require some special services or resources within the current least restrictive placement, but if he or she is making progress in school and is not getting into trouble, that child can be said to be "doing well" and to be successful in school. This is the situation a teacher should always strive for with all children.

WHAT CAN SPECIAL PRESCHOOLS DO TO EASE TRANSITION?

Special preschool programs frequently begin working with handicapped children when the children are very young and often continue working with them for several years. In these cases, it is easy for the staff of the program to think of the child as one of their own. They develop a strong interest in the child's education and start educational programs which they would like to see continued.

But eventually the child reaches school age and must begin attending the public schools. The public school is likely to put the child in an educational program which is quite different. This change in the educational program sometimes disrupts the child's progress, and so it presents a problem. But what can be done about it?

The solution to this problem seems to be for the preschool program to view their responsibility as *actively preparing the child for this unavoidable transition.* This view has important implications both for the curriculum of the preschool and for the methods it uses.

Actively preparing a child for transition means: (a) finding out what preacademic and academic skills the child will be expected to have mastered by the time public school begins and (b) teaching those skills so that the child *has* mastered them by the time preschool ends. This is important even if it means reducing the time usually spent on some activities in preschool. For example, if a child is delayed academically, it may be necessary to devote more time to teaching basic concepts, such as color, numeral, and shape labels. Conversely, children who are withdrawn or socially isolated will require more exposure to both structured and unstructured play activities.

Actively preparing a child for transition also means finding out what expectations the public school teachers have regarding children's conduct and their language, social, and

self-help skills--then working on those skills which fall short of the teacher's expectations. Do all teachers expect their students to raise their hands to ask questions, line up quietly in a row when leaving the classroom, tie their shoes and zip or button coats independently, prior to entering kindergarten? If so, these expectations can be addressed in preschool.

Finally, actively preparing a child for transition means finding out what standards the child's public school teacher sets for the work that students do and teaching the child the skills necessary to meet the standards before the first day of public school.

For example, some teachers expect children to work quietly without talking to classmates or to wait quietly after completing a task until the entire class is finished. These requirements may differ dramatically from the normal preschool routine, but could be addressed at some point during preschool if they were judged important for a child who was soon to begin public school.

In short, actively preparing a child for transition to the public schools begins on the first day in a special

preschool program. The goal is to make the child look as highly skilled and competent as possible before the child sets foot inside the public school. If this approach is used, the child's chances for success in public school are maximized by minimizing the degree to which the child stands out as different from the other students. Finding out what will be expected of

the handicapped child in kindergarten or first grade assumes that the preschool staff knows who the child's teacher is

going to be. If this is not known, the preschool staff can seek the information from as many other teachers at the grade level as possible. Even though this method does not assure us that the person who will actually be the child's teacher will be reached, it will give a very good idea of what is expected of kindergarteners or first graders in general.

Actively *preparing* the child for a successful transition ends when the child finally begins public school. After that point, attention can be turned toward actively *ensuring* that the child has a successful transition. This means working with the child's new teachers following placement to assure that the child is successful. These follow-up services usually take the form of training and/or consultation provided to the child's public school teachers by the preschool teachers, a follow-up consultant, or an outreach worker.

The purpose of this contact is to ensure that skills which the child mastered in the preschool program are not lost in the transition. Sometimes skills mastered in one setting do not appear in another setting. When this happens, specific intervention usually is required to bring the skills out in the second setting. The input of preschool teachers in consulting with regular grade teachers can be very valuable in assuring the new teachers that the child does, indeed, have the skills.

It can also be important in getting the child to produce the skills in the new setting.

WHAT CAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS DO TO EASE TRANSITION?

Transition of the handicapped child from a special preschool program to the public schools begins long before the child's first day in kindergarten or first grade. It begins on the first day of the preschool program. In addition, the transition does not *end* on the first day of public school. Rather, it continues in this new setting. This point of view has important implications for the role of public school personnel in the transition of handicapped children into the public schools.

Several public school personnel are likely to get involved when a child with special needs enters the school. They include the child's classroom teacher and, quite possibly, the school principal, counselor, special education teachers, consultants, school psychologist, social worker, and certain skill area specialists (e.g., speech and hearing consultants, physical or occupational therapists, etc.).

For the child's transition into the public schools to be most successful, the personnel listed above should view the transition as an *active* process leading toward predetermined goals. This outlook should be assured through the school's special education planning and programming process.

In particular, the child's classroom teacher (with the help of other personnel as needed) can help make the handicapped child's transition into the school a successful one by *structuring the situation for success.*

Structuring refers to anything the teacher or others can do to make success more likely for the student in any given school situation. This might involve a number of different aspects of the child's classroom and school program. These can include: (a) organizing the classroom space and furniture to encourage

different activities in different locations; (b) making efficient use of time in the classroom to increase productivity and prevent misbehavior; (c) establishing and following through on classroom rules; (d) providing nondisruptive ways for students to seek teacher assistance; (e) praising students for appropriate behavior at first, and less often later; and (f) using goal-setting and feedback to help students reach goals.

Because one teacher alone might not be able to ensure the student's success, the teacher should identify several possible sources of help available in the school. These resources include the student as a manager of his or her own behavior, classmates, older students, teachers' aides, parent or senior volunteers, principals, counselors, or other adults working in the school whose attention the child enjoys. These persons can be given any tutoring or management responsibilities which the teacher would perform if there were not 20 or 30 other students to teach and manage. However, both training and supervision must be provided for these persons if their involvement is to have its maximum benefit.

AN EXAMPLE OF FULL TRANSITION SERVICES: THE EARLY CHILDHOOD TRANSITION PROGRAM

A program of services designed to facilitate the transition from special preschools to the public schools for handicapped children can be offered by the preschool program, by a public school district, by a third party (such as a cooperative of several school districts or a college or university), or by resources provided through a combination of the above agencies. One such transition program offered by a university is the Early Childhood Transition Program at the University of Kansas.

The Transition Program is part of the Early Childhood Institute and the Department of Human Development at the University of Kansas. One of the goals of the department is to train teachers for preschool programs. Members of the department also conduct research on preschool education and provide a community service through a series of preschool classrooms at the university collectively

known as the Edna A. Hill Child Development Laboratories. One of these classrooms is the Special Preschool Class for Children with Learning and Behavior Problems.

This class provides preschool experiences for children who have already been identified as having difficulty learning or conducting themselves appropriately in a group setting. The Early Childhood Transition Program serves as a bridge between the Special Preschool Class and the public schools in the community. The Transition Program was initiated in 1975 to provide follow-up services in the public schools for children who had been served by or referred to the Special Preschool Class.

The Transition Program consists of two main parts--a year-round half-day program provided in the preschool classroom at the university, and follow-up services provided in the public schools to children who have been referred to or treated by the Special Preschool Program.

HALF-DAY PROGRAM

The half-day program provides an initial preschool experience for handicapped children who have not had a previous structured learning experience. It also provides supplemental experience for children who are enrolled at the same time in another preschool program in the community, or in a public school kindergarten program. Thus, a child with special needs who is enrolled in a kindergarten class or another preschool class or who stays home in the mornings during the regular school year might be in the Special Preschool Program in the afternoons. Children in the summer program are often those who will be repeating kindergarten in the fall. During the summer, the half-day special preschool program is usually the only educational program available to these children.

Children are usually referred to the class by their parents, their preschool or kindergarten teachers, or by other professionals in the community. They usually are referred because they lag behind

their age peers in one or more areas of development. They are enrolled in the special class to help reduce this lag.

The program in the class is partly developmental and partly preventive. In the developmental part of the curriculum, the children are taught skills which most children have but which these children are lacking. These might include various language, motor, and preacademic skills. In the preventive part of the program, children are taught skills which the public school teacher will expect them to know soon in that setting.

These include following instructions, working with a group of other children, completing beginning academic tasks, and playing appropriately. These tasks are frequently identified either by asking teachers what skills the children in their classes will need or by observing in their classrooms.

FOLLOW-UP SERVICES

Three phases of the education of young handicapped children concern the staff of the Transition Program--the children's preschool time, their transition into the public schools, and their early years in the public schools. The staff has a great deal of control over the preschool educational experiences of the children in the special classroom, and the teachers can do whatever is necessary to foster the children's development while they are in the program.

However, when the children begin public school, the special teachers lose much of their control over the programs. At this time, the role of the Transition Program with respect to the child's education shifts from teacher to facilitator. If the program were operated by a school system, the situation would be reversed.

Follow-up services consist of tutoring provided in the public schools to the former preschool students and consultation provided to their public school teachers.

The tutors in the follow-up program are undergraduate college students who hope to become teachers or to work with children in some other capacity. The

transition staff recruits the tutors, trains them, and supervises their work with the students. Children receive tutoring between two and five times a week for 10 to 30 minutes on each occasion. The focus is on skills suggested by the child's classroom teacher. In a transition program run by the schools, older students or community volunteers might serve as tutors.

Consultation is provided by Transition Program staff members. Each staff member is involved with one or more child. Currently the program is providing services for 14 handicapped children who are enrolled part- or full-time in public school classes. Consultation focuses on both academic performance and conduct in the classroom and on social interaction in free-play (recess) situations. In a school-operated transition program, the role of consultant could be played by a resource teacher, psychologist, counselor, or other administrator.

The consultant plays many roles. At various times the consultant might be a tutor or a friend to the child, or a trainer, advisor, aide, listener, or friend to teacher, to other school professionals, or to the child's parents.

In general, follow-up services in the form of tutoring and consultation are designed to provide structure and support to improve the chances that the handicapped child will make a successful transition into a public school class and have a successful experience while there.

CONCLUSION

Beginning public school is a time of adjustment for all children. For young handicapped children, this adjustment can be very difficult. A transition program, designed to bridge the handicapped child's preschool and public school experiences can help the child "get to the other side" successfully and enjoy a happy and productive career in the mainstream of education.

* * * *

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OTHER ECI PUBLICATIONS

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